

Being the Church

Acts 2:42-47

May 15, 2011

In case you haven't noticed, we are having a run of baptisms. Last week, Gigi Halla and Harper Martin. Today, Ian Hall. Next week, Seth Aldrich. Baptism is a holy moment – it is a wonderful picture of Christian community...with the church gathered to celebrate Christ's claim on a new life and the congregation committing themselves to nurture and support the Christian faith of the newly baptized. Baptism is also, in some sense, a confirmation that the church is doing something right...it is one way that God adds to our number, to our witness, as the church is Christ's body.

Before I read the scripture for this morning, I want you to remind you of what happens right before our passage begins. It is just after Pentecost – that wild and windy day – when the Holy Spirit stirred things up and gave birth to the church by sending those who followed Jesus out into the world.

In response to the Spirit's activity and the apostle Peter's good preaching, Acts tells us that 3,000 people were baptized. The small, rag-tag band of Jesus followers grew from 120 to 3,120 people. Now, I don't care how big your church is; that's enough to make any evangelism committee jealous!

Listen with me for God's word as we find it through Acts 2:42-47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their bread with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

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Wouldn't it be nice? This part of Acts paints quite a picture of the church. Mass baptisms with 3,000 people. Awe-inspiring acts of discipleship. A mission-centered community that shares all they have with any who have need. No trace of discord; no mention of conflict; no discussion of disagreement (no hint of committee meetings). Perfect piety. Grateful hearts. And – by the power of God – their numbers continued to grow.

Some commentators on this passage have speculated that, indeed, this vision of the church is so idyllic that the writer of Acts does not intend it to be real.¹ These commentators see this passage as a kind of bridge; to get us from the events of Pentecost to the rest of the story in Acts.

That's a pretty cynical view. Perhaps it is enough to say that on the heels of our passage the writer of Acts uses the same breath to talk about the more messy part of what it means to be Christian community. Read on a couple of chapters and you will meet a young couple in that early church, Ananias and Sapphira, who don't quite buy into the whole "share everything you have" mentality. According to the scripture, they sell a piece of land and decided to withhold some of the proceeds from the church. As a result, each of them is struck down dead. (There's a stewardship sermon in there somewhere, but I don't have the courage to preach it...)

Not two chapters later, we hear about Stephen standing up for what he believes. He gets stoned to death. Two chapters after that, we hear of Saul persecuting those who proclaim Christ. Six chapters later, the church calls a big committee meeting in Jerusalem to settle a growing disagreement: just what to do with the Gentiles (non-Jews) who want to join the community of faith, but aren't willing to abide by all the Jewish laws.

Fast-forward 10 years and Paul (who used to be Saul) is trying to keep his churches from splitting apart at the seams over a whole host of issues.

Two hundred years later, the church gathers for a bunch of meetings where they hash out just what we mean, exactly, when we talk about the Trinity. Did the Father precede the Son? What about the Holy Spirit? They settled that (with no small controversy, and no small amount of bloodshed), which is why we say the Nicene Creed on communion Sundays.

¹ *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010)

Keep going about 1,000 years and you have an – all told – 300 year disagreement over where the church derives its authority. Does it come from the Pope, or the Bible? We called that time period the Protestant Reformation.

Keep walking with me through history another century to a committee meeting in London that lasted about five years where many of those Protestants hammered out their theological disagreements by drafting what we know as the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Cross the Atlantic Ocean and you can hear about the Presbyterian Church which formed its first presbytery in New Jersey in 1706. It took a mere 35 years before the church split over the issue of whether preachers needed a theological education before they stepped into the pulpit. Everyone kissed and made up 17 years later, only to argue (and split again) over similar issues in another 79 years.

I've skipped a lot, and I could go on. Since the Presbyterian Church floated over from the British Isles pre-American-Revolution, there have been 18 splits in our family of faith. And that's just us! I read this week that – worldwide – there are over 38,000 different denominations within the Christian church. That is 38,000 different splits.

Thirty. Eight. Thousand.²

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Our family of faith, the Presbyterian Church (USA), made the news last week. And when I say “made the news,” I mean, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today, CNN, Fox News, NPR, Facebook, Twitter...you name it, Presbyterians were in the headlines.

Last Tuesday night a majority of presbyteries approved a recommendation by the General Assembly that will change the language of our ordination standards to give individual congregations and presbyteries the responsibility of deciding whether candidates are qualified for office. That's not what the news stations said, of course. Their headlines were “Presbyterians Clear Way for Gay Clergy.” A tad simplistic – but it is true that the new language in our constitution no longer prohibits gays and

² I read this on The Blue Room Blog (<http://theblueroomblog.org>), by the Rev. MaryAnn McKibben Dana. That blog post, and the comments on it (especially by the Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford) have shaped my thoughts for this sermon.

lesbians from being ordained. Now, as it was every year until 1997, it is up to the local body to decide.

As you can imagine, there are people in our denomination both rejoicing and despairing over this news. I know for a fact that there are people in this room who are doing both.

Some worry about whether this change will lead to more division within our denomination. I pray that it will not. I am encouraged by the efforts of one group of “big-steeple” pastors – very much opposed to this recent change – who have committed themselves to stay within the PC(USA)...though perhaps by creative means.

I think it would be a tragedy if our prolonged debate over the issue of ordination led to there being 38,001 denominations, because I think it hurts the heart of God to see his church divided.

But, then again, the voice a friend³ reminds me that my concern and anxiety about the church’s unity is really...from a biblical point of view...a non-issue. The metaphor that scripture uses to describe the church is clear, in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul says: “You **are** the body Christ.” That is in the indicative. Not “you should be,” not “you used to be,” not “wouldn’t it be great if you were...” No, the words scripture uses to describe the church declare – “You **are** the body of Christ.”

Methodists, Episcopalians, Pentecostals... “You are the body of Christ.” Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Baptist (Cooperative and Southern and Independent)... “You are the body of Christ.” United Church of Christ, Jehovah’s Witness, and every stripe of Presbyterian... “You are the body of Christ.” 38,000 or 38,001 or 30,002... “You are the body of Christ.”

We don’t get to choose whether we are one; God has declared that we are. Obviously, we have expressed our differences – the body has many different parts...but in the eye of God we are still one body.

Our unity is in Christ – and Christ did not give up his life in order that his body would be divided against itself. Christ gave up his life in order that his body would be at work bringing the healing message of the gospel to a hurting world.

³ That would be the Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Dallas.

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The church has come a long way from that little group of disciples we heard about in Acts who worshipped and prayed and shared and ate together. 3,000 baptisms is nothing to sneeze at – but consider the fact that there are 2.1 billion baptized people on the face of the earth right now who confess Jesus as Lord.

We are a little large to keep all things in common, but this week there will be churches – Presbyterian Churches – from all over the country who will go and share what they have to support people suffering from the floodwaters of the Mississippi.

At 2.1 billion people, we are a little large to fit in one temple – but on any given Sunday there are Christians gathered for worship, and at table, breaking bread and committing themselves to a life a prayer.

One of the challenges of being the church, I think, is when we believe that those who have come before us had it easier than we do; it's when we get discouraged that our disagreements are more difficult to overcome than those previously encountered by communities of faith.

But look back at our history and you'll find that – even from the beginning – the church has always been beset by controversy and we always will be. Still, we are the body of Christ – and, by the power of the Holy Spirit – God continues to prosper the work of our hands as we point toward the kingdom that God promises.

Like one of my colleagues who is preaching this morning, let me close by quoting what a friend put as his Facebook status the day after our Presbyterian Church made news headlines:

“[As] morning dawns on a new day in our little part of the church...the hungry still need to be fed, the refugees still long for a home, the flood victims are still undone by loss and shock, the lonely and wandering still need to experience love and hospitality, and the oppressed and addicted still long for freedom. So back to it. Peace.”⁴

I couldn't say it better myself. Amen.

⁴ The Rev. Michael Kirby, with thanks to the Rev. Anna Pickney Straight and her good sermon on this text from today at University Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, NC.